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Frankenstein: Reality and Fiction

by Katherine Morales

(English 1102)

ABSTRACT

Every writer's works' are influenced by something. This could be anything, from a motive, a person, an event, a wish, a life. After years of research and study, scholars have determined that the connections existing between Mary Shelley's life and her book *Frankenstein* are far more than just simple coincidences. The various references to family members and expressions of situations and feelings, among others, make Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* a puzzle in which she has secretly embedded pieces of her own life.

Great minds of artists and authors have enjoyed placing "secrets" in their masterpieces. Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, has been known for such secrecy hidden in his paintings, "The Last Supper" being a good example. Discovering secrets, deciphering works and finding connections in the works of a known individual fills almost any researcher with pride and satisfaction. Such has been the case of the scholars studying Mary Shelley and her acknowledged book *Frankenstein*, among others. If we closely analyze her book and her life, we will definitely find similarities. Now, if we study her work even more carefully, it is possible to discover even more. Information in the form of small details, which at first might have been considered insignificant, can turn to be great hints or revealing factors that help to understand situations or feelings of the author. From sources that include various versions of Mary Shelley's biography, writing from journals written by Mary Shelley and her book *Frankenstein*, this research paper intends to reveal some of the meaningful similarities found in both Mary Shelley's life and her book *Frankenstein*. These vary from names and places coincidences, to common traits of characters' backgrounds, descriptions, life and happenings, and even some the author's deep wishes and emotions. The evidence supporting these make Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein* a puzzle in which she has secretly embedded pieces of her life.

The first puzzle in Shelley's novella relates to the names connections. "The autobiographical dimension of *Frankenstein* is perhaps most conspicuous in the novel's manifold references to Shelley's immediate family and friends" (*Mary Shelley: Frankenstein* 9). These names are MWS, Victor, Elizabeth and William, based in order of appearance in *Frankenstein*. Before starting the discussion of these, it is important to remember that most of them may suggest meanings whose acceptances depend only in the reader's choice. *Frankenstein* starts and ends with a series of letters from Captain Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Saville, or Margaret Walton Saville. Her initials, MWS, also stand for Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the name Mary acquired after marrying Percy Shelley (Sunstein 129). A very important name is Victor, the book's main character. Victor was the pseudonym Percy Shelley (Mary Shelley's husband) used during his boyhood (Baldick 36). According to Badalamenti, "Percy saw his father as tyrannical and this suggests that he chose the name Victor to feel triumphant over him" (428). This name bond between Percy and Victor Frankenstein is further enhanced by the fact that "Elizabeth" was the name of Victor's foster sister/cousin and Percy's sister (Baldick 36). Another relevant name is William. In *Frankenstein*, William was Victor's young brother. In real life, it was Mary Shelley's father, half-brother and of "the son she was raising while writing the novel" (36). This "brother" name connection has been one of the starting points for a later comparison of Mary as Victor, which will be examined later.

Besides names of people, names of places are common too. As Florescu states:

The influences of Swiss, Genevan and Alpine geographies are very apparent in the writing of *Frankenstein*. They're also evident both in Mary's and Shelley's letters and in the History of a Six Weeks tour. (9-11)

A memorable example of Mary Shelley's usage of these kinds of geographies is seen in Victor Frankenstein's first encounter with the creature, in Chapter II of Volume II. Victor's landscape descriptions of the "sea of ice" include plenty of uneven surfaces, crevices and adjectives such as "awful and majestic," "precipitous," "aerial summits" and "icy glittery peaks" (Shelley 63-5). This similar way of describing is also present on Mary Shelley's journals. Here is a fragment of Mary Shelley describing the Mer de Glace:

This is the most desolate place in the world –iced mountains surround it –no sign of vegetation appears except on the place from which [we] view the scene –we went on the ice- It is traversed by irregular crevices whose sides of ice appear blue while the surface is of a dirty white. (*The Journals of Mary Shelley* 119)

As it can be appreciated, her experience and knowledge of this kind of scenery influenced her writing in *Frankenstein*. The specific example just mentioned indirectly suggests a reason for her to have chosen such an icy, deserted and big place as the creature's refuge: to represent his loneliness. Also, it is said that Mary's love for arctic-like scenery (and nature in general), started when she was taken to excursions by the Baxters, a family that took care of her by her father's petition while there were some medical and familiar problems in her house. The tours with the Baxters included locales like Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Tay, Inverness and the Orkneys (Sunstein 61). "For the rest of her life she had a yearning for mountains" and "explorations of unknown regions were always to fascinate her" (61). This information is portrayed very well in the character Robert Walton, as it becomes another reason for Mary to write about.

Apart from the name connections, personality, backgrounds and other qualities of *Frankenstein's* characters are shared by the Shelley's, allowing for different comparisons among these. The first one to discuss is Percy Shelley as Victor. The name connection plus the noble, aristocratic status (Badalamenti 426) of them create a base for this relation. Moreover, their love for their 'sister/foster sister Elizabeth' adds to this. Victor explains how he adored and became "playfellows" and friends with Elizabeth during his childhood (Shelley 19-20). And years later, this admiration transformed into love as they went from engagement to marriage. Percy also loved his sister's support (Badalamenti 428), so much that at some point he revealed and "incestuous desire" (Mellor 74). One more thought that makes the Victor-Percy comparison more significant is their interest on science. As it can be perceived in the first chapters of the book, Victor's interest for science started when he was pretty young. As he said, "Natural philosophy is the genius that has regulated my faith" (Shelley 21). Percy as well was interested in science. In 1802, times when Galvani's experiments were popular, the ten-year-old Percy started a 10-year sequence of experiments in electro-chemistry (Badalamenti 428). This is meaningful since it affirms that just like in Victor's case, Percy's interest in science came at a young age. Years later, he and his friend Lord Byron still showed this attraction for science, as they continued to read and discuss about it. To end this comparison, we cannot ignore Victor's and Percy's roles as editors. Near the end of the book, Victor discovers that Robert had been writing his story and asks for the notes to revise them. And as most readers of *Frankenstein* know, Percy edited Mary Shelley's story (Mellor 75). All the evidence linking Victor and Percy that has been considered is sufficient in quantity and meaning to believe they are connected.

The second character comparison taken into account is Mary Shelley as Safie. This similitude originates in the fact that Mary and Safie were motherless after some point. Furthermore, their mothers share some qualities, as both were in a sense considered a minority for their times and societies: Safie's mother was a Christian Arab (Shelley 83) and Mary's mother was a well-known feminist (Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*, 8). Apart from that, equally important were these mother's views on education. Here's a descriptive passage about Safie's mother found in *Frankenstein*:

She [Safie's mother] instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellects, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet. (Shelley 83)

This revealing fragment is important since it demonstrates Safie's mother's beliefs in education, which were strongly shared by Mary Wollstonecraft (Mary's mother). She expressed these multiple times in her book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, and was very explicit by saying "I wish them [her daughters] to be taught to think" (Nitchie 85). These ideals from part of the mothers might as well been the cause of the admiration they provoked on their daughters. Mary, for instance, reflected in being interested in her works and learning about her, and by searching refuge at her mother's grave (Florescu 33-4). Safie, on the other side, "spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother" (Shelley 83). Now, if we leave the mothers aside, there's still a strong event that joins Mary and Safie, and it has to be with the way they left home. As many people may know, Mary Shelley eloped with Percy (while he was still married to another woman), taking her sister Jane with them. This made her father, Mr. Godwin, furious (Moers 222). In Saphie's case, her father had betrayed the man she loved [Felix], and had some plans for Safie as he was getting ready to run away. But when Safie learned of Felix's situation, she decided to leave Italy in search of Felix (Shelley 85). The way Safie and Mary left home, against their fathers' will and having their lovers as the deciding factor, makes them alike.

Lastly, an interesting comparison to analyze is Mary Shelley as Victor Frankenstein. As it was stated before, Victor Frankenstein had a great interest on science. Mary shared it too, and it was actually "the discussions at Diodati about the origins of life and the experiments on galvanism that furnished the stimulus for the story of Frankenstein" (Nitchie 27). The multiple scientific references found in the book tell us that Mary must have known some science, and if she did not before, she certainly made sure to acquire that knowledge since she read Davy in 1816 (Nitchie 26). Her father actually supports this attitude of Mary when it comes to learning when saying that "her desire of knowledge is great, and her perseverance in everything she undertakes almost invincible" (Sunstein 58). This is also appreciated in Victor's learning history, from his interest in phenomenon science to modern chemistry. Apart from science, the way they were educated was comparable in some aspects. Near the beginning of chapter I, Victor narrates:

Our studies were never forced; and by some means we always had an end placed in view, which excited us to ardour in the persecution of them... We learned Latin and English, and that we might read in those languages; and so far from study being made odious to us through punishment, we loved application, and our amusements would have been the labours of other children. (Shelley 20)

Now, compare this fragment above to the following description of Mary's education: "...the girls were educated at home. Most of the time they had a governess; at intervals they had daily language lessons" (Nitchie 83). If we add to this Mary's love for wisdom and active mind, and the fact that her parents believed that studies should not be imposed by fixed rules (Nitchie 85), it makes clear that Victor and Mary had a natural tendency to learn, as they didn't feel pressure from their educators and

both were instructed in learning various languages. Lastly, a small fact to remember is that Mary and Victor were some well-seasoned travelers in Europe. In *Frankenstein*, Victor had been to Geneva, England, France and more. Mary had been to these places too at some point before and during writing the story. Just to provide an example, she went to France, Germany and Switzerland when she eloped with Percy Shelley (Florescu 47).

To conclude this comparison, it is interesting to note that Mary and Victor had bad experiences with procreation. Victor's creation of the creature took time, and the result was not exactly as he expected; as he saw his creation as horrible and hideous, and the only thought of all the tragedies it caused (and could cause) mortified him for the rest of his life. Mary as well had bad experiences with procreating, as she lost three of her children during childhood. Additionally, an interesting view is presented by Mellor when she says: "[Mary] identified her inability to conceive a story with a women's inability to conceive a child" (Mellor 54), noting Shelley's hard time when trying to come up with a story.

The next analyzed view relates *Frankenstein* and Shelley's life according to tragedies. Death-related tragedies occurring in Mary's life are common in protagonist Victor too, being yet another reason to believe she portrayed part of her in him. Victor gradually lost all his loved ones, starting with his mother Caroline (Shelley 25). That followed by his brother William being murdered by the creature (44), Justine's execution (57), the assassinations of his best friend Clerval (125) and Elizabeth (136), his father (137), and lastly, his own death (152). This is a considerable amount of death in a short period of time, and the last ones affected him in a stronger manner since they were a consequence of his creation. While Mary experienced fewer death-related pains and guilt, they still marked her life. She was "deeply traumatized by the knowledge of her own mother's death in giving birth to her" (Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein* 8), her first baby's death, and her half-sister suicide (Moers 221). This last one affected Mary to a very great degree, as she felt guilty for not having realized her sister's feelings sooner, and for having been unable to offer her a home (*The Journals of Mary Shelley* 140).

The expression of feelings was perhaps another reason for Mary Shelley to have written *Frankenstein*. A variety of feelings can be found in the book, of which the main ones are loneliness and anger. "It is impossible to judge how much of Mary's sympathy for the rejected, excluded Creature was drawn from her undying rage against Mrs. Godwin as the usurper who took her mother's place and exiled her from her father's affections" (Seymour 173). This implies that Mary tried to express some of her loneliness through the creature, making him the "central symbol of loneliness" (Nitchie 17). Throughout the book other symbols of solitude can be found too:

Walton's solitary childhood, his lack of a friend on board his ship, the deserted graveyards, *Frankenstein* lonely laboratory, the valleys of Servox and Chamounix, Mont Blanc dwelling apart, Montanvert "terrifically desolate," the isolated hut on the "remotest of the Orkneys," the ship caught in the endless fields of ice, the single dog-sled, the figure of the Monster disappearing into the unpeopled North. (Nitchie 16)

Mary experienced a horrible solitude after Shelley's death (Nitchie 19), but since this paper is focused on her life and therefore happenings that occur before or while writing the book, this should not be considered. Yet it is important to remember that being motherless indeed makes a child feel lonely, and that Mary's relation with her stepmother was not good. In fact, in 1811 a conflict with her hostile stepmother caused her father to treat her with silence. This made Mary fall into depression and to make matters worse, soon after that she developed a severe skin infection (Sunstein 54-55). Even though her father took her to the doctor, he was still cold and the conflicts eventually resumed, so he decided to take Mary to the Baxters for some time (Sunstein 56). All these events, and the separation from her father, caused Mary to express her loneliness in the book.

Having earlier related Percy to Victor, and later giving Victor a miserable fate suggests that Mary Shelley's anger was directed towards Percy. Interestingly enough, Victor's age when dying was 25, the same age Percy was when Mary finished writing the book (Badalamenti 427). Mary loved Percy, and that justifies why she eloped with him. But love does not mean everlasting happiness and Mary had serious reasons to feel these anger feelings. The day Mary and Percy left, they took Mary's step-sister Jane with them. There's evidence in Jane's writing as well as some of Mary's letters supporting the belief that Jane had an affair with Percy (Mellor 229-230). Jane's flirtation with Percy surely annoyed Mary, and the fact that Percy did not do anything to stop it but fomented it instead, made things worse. During Mary's pregnancy, Jane and Percy went out various times, leaving Mary alone in times where she most needed company. For example, the day her first baby died (March 6th, 1815), Mary had to ask her friend Hogg to accompany and console her (*The Journals of Mary Shelley* 68). And the next day, Jane and Percy resumed their visits and errands to town (68-69).

The other reason for Mary to be angry with Shelley had to do with their children. She blamed him for destroying their two children and for not sharing her grief at their deaths (Mellor 142). This view was supported by one of Percy's biographer, Richard Holmes, since Percy's carelessness and constant moving were factors that contributed to these children's deaths (Mellor 141).

The last topic considered in this paper is life resuscitation. The following lines express Victor's views on life and death:

I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time (although now I find it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (Shelley 32)

This reflection shows how Victor's original intention of creating life turned into reanimation of the dead. After having read about Mary's life, it is very easy to deduce that the life resuscitation topic in *Frankenstein* was influenced by Mary's deep wish to bring her loved ones back to life. This can explain the "intensity of feeling as well as its sudden mood swings from parental love to guilt and disgust and from subservience to anger and resentment" (Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein* 8). But, who did Mary want to revive? Probably the people for whose death she felt somewhat responsible for. These could be her mother, her half-sister and her children. But if we had to say who awakened this wish first, it would be her first daughter. The evidence for these is in her dreams:

Dream that my little baby came to life again –that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived –I wake and find no baby- I think about the little thing all day –not in good spirits... (*The Journals of Mary Shelley* 70)

This dream and constant thinking about the baby had started days ago, and repeats again. That is the main reason that makes many interpret that Mary is trying to indirectly express this wish through her character Victor.

After having read this paper, some may still argue that the happenings and similarities in Mary Shelley's life and *Frankenstein* might be mere coincidence. Nevertheless, years of research from various scholars that have closely studied Mary Shelley's works and her life have seen and proven how strong and constant these similarities are, as they not only appear in *Frankenstein* but in several of Mary Shelley's works. Examples of these works are *Mathilda*, *Lodore*, *The Last Man*, among others. Because this paper's main focus is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, connections existing on the previously mentioned works are not discussed. On the whole, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is doubtless a complete and intriguing work of fiction. But more even more intriguing is the way she secretly attached various fragments of her own life. Mary Shelley's relatives, visited places, emotions

and wishes will remain in *Frankenstein*, stating in part as another testimony of her life.

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